

## An Introduction to Yoga

Yoga videos and journals fill the racks of health food stores, bookstores, and even some grocery stores. Its popularity has grown tremendously: its benefits are discussed widely on public television and social media, and your local athletic club probably offers yoga classes. So what is yoga, anyway? When did it begin? Is it just for stress reduction? Do you have to be flexible or in shape to do yoga? Why should anyone do yoga?

### Why yoga?

Think about it. You are riding on the train. It is crowded with no room for you to sit. You are holding on to the pole to steady yourself. The train jolts to a sudden stop. Your body tenses up. You absent-mindedly massage your neck. The next morning you wake up and stretch and yawn. Your jaw feels tight. Was it the neighbor's barking dog last night that kept you awake, or was it a bad dream? As you drive to an appointment, you are already late and a car pulls in front of you traveling at 20 m.p.h. You feel your hands, arms and chest tighten up, and you start talking to yourself: "Come on, move, move!"

Your body is like an audio-visual recording system. As you go about your day, you record experiences and sensations that influence your thoughts and feelings. Thoughts create beliefs, and beliefs shape the way you think about yourself and how you approach life. Thoughts and feelings impact your physical condition, as well.

Yoga addresses the mind and the body. Begun about 5,000 years ago in the Hindu Valley in India, traditional yoga was a spiritual practice. Practitioners contemplated the questions: Who am I? Where do I come from? What must I do? Today, many people realize the importance of the mental aspect of yoga but practice yoga for its physical benefits, as well.

### What It Is

Yoga is a combination of movement and deep breathing, which results in the massaging of the body's muscles, bones and internal organs. Yoga teaches poses or postures that combine to create a series of moves called vinyasas. While the body moves through the postures, the brain releases feel-good chemicals. It is a practice that you can begin easily and simply.

There are many different types of yoga, allowing everyone with an interest to find a practice with which they are comfortable. The more familiar yoga practices in the United States, to name a few, are:

- **Hatha:** The most common form of yoga, this combines intense breathing with a flowing movement between postures.
- **Bikram:** An intense yoga practice done in a heated room with temperatures higher than 90 degrees to increase flexibility. It typically incorporates balancing standing postures.

- **Ashtanga:** Referred to as power yoga, it is particularly good for those who want to break a sweat. This yoga also increases stamina, flexibility and strength.
- **Iyengar:** Focuses on proper body alignment by using props and blankets to deepen the poses. The poses are held for a minute or more to work on skeletal and muscular alignment.

Many practitioners consider yoga a sort of moving meditation. The combined moving and breathing directs the student back to the inner self, teaching him or her to shift the focus from the external world to the inner world.

The Western approach to yoga seems to focus more on the physical health benefits, such as strengthening muscles, increasing flexibility and developing strength. Yoga postures can address structural problems by stretching out one's limbs to eliminate aches and pains. Yoga eases indigestion and headaches and can deepen relaxation, aiding better sleep. Yoga teaches the student to listen to the body; by paying closer attention to the body, the student learns to detect subtle changes indicating illness. This improved attention enables better care for wellness and preventive practices.

## What Yoga Teaches

Hatha yoga focuses on breath and postures. For example, one of the postures is called "Mountain." Basically, you stand with your feet hip-width apart, with your shoulders gently rolled back, your chest slightly raised, your gaze soft as you look straight ahead. As you position yourself in this firm but not rigid stance, breathe from your diaphragm. This posture will create a sense of strength and energy.

The postures are not always as easy as they look. As a beginning student, finding your body trying to twist, attempting to balance on one foot or watching your teacher make a perfect triangle when you can only slightly tip can indeed challenge the ego. The practice of yoga teaches the student to observe, to go to the limit, to watch the changes take place with practice. Through movement, the student replaces old patterns and habits, altering them in a nearly unconscious manner. The student will begin to acknowledge the changes, noticing, for example, that the leg that would not balance now balances easily. Feelings of self-esteem rise with each accomplishment in this personal practice.

By following the breathing in the yoga practice, the student is centered in the present rather than falling back into the past or focusing on the future. Being in the past may bring up regret, and looking to the future may cause anxiety. The present is the moment where life is truly happening; yoga teaches this awareness.

Yoga will teach the gift of patience, the value of persistence and the ability to tolerate the anxiety of making changes. As you begin yoga, the postures may feel unfamiliar and awkward; this begins the task of suspending judgment about limits and abilities. By constantly returning to the yoga practice, you will master each posture, increasing your self-assuredness while diminishing doubt.

## Getting Started

The physical requirements of yoga include wearing loose clothing, finding a quiet place, using a non-skid surface and practicing on an empty stomach.

For an introduction to yoga, using DVDs or instructional YouTube videos may be the least-threatening way, as you can use them to start practicing in the privacy of your own home. These multimedia instructional guides are available at bookstores, sporting-goods dealers and health food stores.

If you would like to find a yoga instructor or join a class, check your community health organizations or do an Internet search. Another way to locate a teacher is to merely ask around; word of mouth is often the best recommendation.

## Resources

- American College of Sports Medicine: [www.acsm.org](http://www.acsm.org)
- National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine: [www.nccam.nih.gov](http://www.nccam.nih.gov)
- National Institutes of Health: [www.nih.gov](http://www.nih.gov)
- American Council on Exercise: [www.acefitness.org](http://www.acefitness.org)

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